

# Defying Gravity!

## *A Brief History of Juggling*

Though the word *juggler* comes from the Latin *joculari*, meaning "to jest," juggling is no joke. It has been regarded as a serious art, a challenging sport, and a rewarding recreation throughout its history.



Juggling has been around for a very long time. The earliest known records of jugglers are **Egyptian wall paintings** made about 4000 years ago. Whether their practice was primarily athletic or part of a ritual is unknown.

Asians have a long history of prop manipulation. Among other things, the Chinese were known for manipulating *diabolos* or spools that are whirled and tossed using sticks and string. The Japanese performed ball and stick play from which modern ball juggling may have developed. Asians also practiced *antipodism* or juggling with their feet.

Between the 4th and 5th centuries B.C., jugglers began appearing in **Greek sculptures**, art, and pottery. It was a form of recreation for the Greeks, and many participants were women.



Figurines, pottery, paintings, and ancient writings from the 4th century A.D. and beyond show that juggling was widespread and had varied uses. The Romans even juggled weapons and shields as part of their military training.



In the Middle Ages, most kings and lords had a **court jester** or clown who could juggle. Other jugglers moved from town to town to earn their living, passing on news and gossip as they traveled. Aside from court jesters, most entertainers were not highly regarded during this time because they were considered vagrants and outcasts.

After the Middle Ages, juggling made a comeback in Europe. Some towns even had full time *Ball-Masters* who performed and taught people how to juggle and walk the tightrope.

Juggling has also been practiced for centuries in the Americas, as seen in **Aztec art** and other sources. In some cultures, the *shaman* or priest juggled as part of religious ceremonies.



In the 1800s, juggling was prominent in circus and variety shows, the most popular forms of entertainment at the time. Most of what we know about these performers comes from *show bills* or posters that exaggerated their feats.

By the early 1900s, most jugglers were working in circuses and *vaudeville* or variety shows. When movies and television were invented, circuses became less common and vaudeville faded away. Then in the 1960s, various forms of juggling started to become popular once again.

Today, juggling continues to be explored and enjoyed as art, sport, and recreation.